DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 477 476 PS 031 338

AUTHOR	Harrison, Linda
TITLE	Attachment: Building Secure Relationships in Early Childhood.
INSTITUTION	Australian Early Childhood Association, Inc., Watson.
ISBN	ISBN-1-875890-637
ISSN	ISSN-1440-5148
PUB DATE	2003-00-00
NOTE	25p.; Published quarterly. Theme issue.
AVAILABLE FROM	Publications Section, Early Childhood Australia, Inc., P.O. Box 105, Watson, ACT 2602, Australia ($14.95). Tel: (02)-6241-6900; Fax: (02)-6241-5547; e-mail: national@aeca.org.au; Web site: http://www.aeca.org.au.
PUB TYPE	Collected Works - Serials (022) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
JOURNAL CIT	AECA Research in Practice Series, 2003.; v10 n2 2003
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS
DESCRIPTORS	*Attachment Behavior; *Caregiver Child Relationship; Developmental Stages; Interpersonal Competence; *Parent Child Relationship; Peer Relationship; Social Development; Theories ; *Young Children
IDENTIFIERS	Bowlby (John); *Security of Attachment

ABSTRACT

Attachment describes the unique human ability to form lasting relationships with others, and to maintain these relationships over time and distance. Research into attachment has shown that children have the potential to form many attachment relationships, and that each relationship can contribute to the child's growing sense of self. This booklet provides insights in to the ways that caregivers can establish positive relationships with children. The booklet summarizes John Bowlby's theory of attachment relationships, and details the secure and insecure attachment types. It then explores using this attachment theory for understanding children's behavior, describing parent-child separations and peer interactions/conflicts as they might occur within the secure, insecure-avoidant, insecure-ambivalent, and disorganized attachment models. The booklet notes that the challenge to building secure attachment relationships with children is to avoid reinforcing any existing insecurities, and to provide children with experiences of secure interactions. (Contains 14 references and a short list of further sources on attachment.) (HTH)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 477 476

Attachment

Linda Harrison

Building secure relationships in early childhood

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE, AND IN ELECTRONIC MEDIA FOR ERIC COLLECTION SUBSCRIBERS ONLY, HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Penny Greenwell

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Early hood AUSTRALIA INC.

About ECA

Early Childhood Australia Inc. (ECA), formerly the Australian Early Childhood Association, actively promotes the provision of high quality services for all young children from birth to eight years and their families, and supports the important role of parents. ECA is also the national umbrella organisation for children's services. ECA is a leading early childhood publisher.

About the Research in Practice Series

The ECA Research in Practice Series is published four times each year by Early Childhood Australia.

The series aims to provide practical, easy to read, up-to-date information and support to a growing national readership of early childhood workers. The books bring together the best information available on wide ranging topics and are an ideal resource for children's services workers and others interested in the care and education of young children.

Invitation to Authors

If you are interested in writing for the ECA Research in Practice Series or any other ECA publication, please contact the Publications Section of ECA for further information on the preparation of manuscripts and for a copy of the guidelines for contributors.

Edition Editor

Pam Linke

Series Editor

Penelope Craswell

Publications Assistant

Wendy Sanderson

Graphic Design

Claire Connelly

Cover Photograph

Rhonda Milner

Photographs

Barry Brown, Judy Tempest, Andrew Sikorski, Laurel Purtle

Acknowledgements

Thanks to all those who appear in the photographs.

Membership, subscription & advertising inquiries:

Early Childhood Australia Inc.
PO Box 105 Watson ACT 2602
Tel: (02) 6241 6900 Fax: (02) 6241 5547
Sales line (toll free): 1800 356 900
Email: national@aeca.org.au

© Copyright 2003

All rights reserved by Early Childhood Australia Inc.

Material herein must not be reproduced in any form without the written permission of ECA Inc.

Registered for posting as a publication—PP232100/00036

ISSN 1440-5148

ISBN 1 875890 63 7

Printed by National Capital Printing, Canberra

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Contents

Introduction	1
John Bowlby's Theory of Attachment Relationships	2
A secure base for exploration	3
Attachment types	4
Secure attachment	4
Insecure attachment	4
Using attachment theory to understand children's behaviour	6
Parent–child separations	6
Conflict and interactions with peers	11
Building secure attachment relationships with children	15
Conclusion	16
Note	17
References and further reading on attachment	18

About the author

Linda Harrison is Senior Lecturer in early childhood education at Charles Sturt University, Bathurst Campus. Her PhD studies focused on infant–mother attachment relationships in infancy and child outcomes at early preschool age. Her study involved observations of over 100 children in a wide variety of care settings. More recently, she has investigated the longitudinal effects of children's attachment models by following children from school entry through to their primary school years. Linda has undertaken specialist training in infant and preschool-age attachment methodology with Dr Robert Marvin, University of North Carolina, and is a certified scorer for the infant attachment system. In her current work, she has collaborated with Dr Gary Resnick, who has developed a 12-year-old attachment scoring system. Linda also brings her experience of working in family day care and occasional care to the writing of this Research in Practice book.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Acknowledgements

The material included in this booklet has been developed through in-service programs and conference workshops for early childhood staff and child protection workers. In presenting this volume, Linda acknowledges the exceptional work being done in Australian early childhood services by Dr Robyn Dolby, of the NSW Institute of Psychiatry, Parramatta, and the Social Policy Research Centre, University of New South Wales. Ongoing discussions with Robyn about the application of attachment theory to child care services have inspired the writing of this booklet.

Introduction

Attachment is something that affects all of us. It describes our unique human ability to form lasting relationships with others, and to maintain these relationships over time and distance. We all have attachment relationships—with members of our families, friends, lovers, or children we care for or have cared for in the past—and recognise these as an important part of our lives and our individual make-up. What is surprising, then, is that attachment is a fairly recent addition to the theories of development that inform early childhood practice. This booklet is designed to provide readers with a basic, and practical, understanding of this important theory.

Research into attachment has shown that children have the potential to form many attachment relationships, and that each relationship can contribute to the child's growing sense of self (Howes, 1999; van IJzendoorn, Sagi, & Lambermon, 1992). From this perspective, the child is seen as developing within a network of attachment relationships. While parents and close family members are the child's main attachment figures, other caregivers such as child care workers, carers, and family day carers, who are in a position to work with children on a long-term basis and to form lasting relationships with them, also play an important role in this network. This publication aims to provide insights into the ways that caregivers can establish positive relationships with children. The author draws on examples from her research to illustrate the ways that children's behaviour can tell us about their attachment needs and how attachment theory can guide staff in their interactions with young children.

John Bowlby's Theory of Attachment Relationships

Any summary of this topic must start with John Bowlby (1969/1982), who has been called the 'father' of attachment theory. In seeking to explain the role of lasting relationships in human development, Bowlby argued that the infant's attachment to the mother was a biological need, a survival mechanism, and as such, was critical to the child's emotional wellbeing. His theory was based, in part, on his studies of young children in hospital who had been separated from their parents for long periods of time, in accordance with the policies of the 1940s and 50s. The experiences of these children confirmed for him the very real damage that occurred when attachment bonds were broken.

Nowadays, social policies and practices reflect the importance of parent–child relationships. Parents expect to be able to stay with their children when they are ill, to hold them as soon as they are born, and to have a role in determining the type of experiences they have at child care or preschool. It's important to remember that only two generations ago this was not the case. Children were sent away, or taken away, and such practices were recommended by 'experts' as being good for them. Bowlby's work, and the wealth of research that followed, have extended our understanding of attachment relationships and their long-term impact on children's lives. As a result, society has begun to change direction and take note of the role attachment plays in the human life course. Part of this change has been a growing recognition of the role of child care workers and carers as alternative attachment figures for young children.

A secure base for exploration

Attachment theory speaks to the emotional content of our lives. When we look at human behaviour from an attachment perspective, emotional security is seen as the key to explaining the way we interact. According to Bowlby's theory, the foundations of our emotional security are laid down in infancy. The quality of the earliest relationships, which depend on the caregiver's capacity to be emotionally available, sensitive and responsive to the baby's needs, is what determines the level of security and support the infant experiences. This, in turn, influences the baby's developing sense of self.

According to attachment theory, the external world of relationships defines the infant's internal world, that is, his or her sense of being loved, of being part of a world that is understandable, and of being able to make things happen and to meet the infant's own needs. This internal world then influences the way the child will respond to the outside world.

Bowlby explained attachment in relation to its opposite—exploration. He saw attachment and exploration as opposing, but complementary, forces acting within the child. When the child's attachment system is activated, the focus is on internal needs for emotional security. When the child feels secure, the attachment system switches off and the focus moves to the external world, allowing exploration and play. Understanding the relationship between attachment and exploration is the key to understanding how the attachment system functions. This gives us a framework for the way we work with children.

The overall goal for early childhood workers is to support the child's attachment needs and to provide a secure base from which the child is able to explore the social and physical environment. From a child's point of view, a secure base is a person whom they can go to for comfort and who makes them feel safe to play (Dolby, Warren & Mares, 2001). The challenge for carers is to be able to see the world from the child's perspective and to match their own secure base behaviour to the child's unique attachment needs. This is best achieved when we have an understanding of the type, or model, of attachment that the child brings to the early childhood setting.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Attachment types

Attachment is broadly described as secure or insecure. Security and insecurity are shorthand terms used to describe the child's internal working model of relationships; that is, the way the child views the social world and makes sense of social experiences. This model develops gradually over time in response to the caregiving experiences the child has had, particularly the way his attachment needs have been met.

Secure attachment

The *secure* child has learnt from previous experiences that his attachment needs will be met, in a predictable, straightforward way. Relationships are characterised by open expression of emotions and intimacy, which help the child to manage distress. A secure child is able to use their attachment figure as a secure base to freely explore the environment, because of the internalised knowledge that the caregiver will be there for them when and if it is needed. As a result, the child is well regulated emotionally, and better equipped to learn through exploration, play, and social interaction.

Insecure attachment

Insecure children are less able to openly express their attachment needs. Instead, they may minimise or heighten emotion expression, making it more difficult for their attachment needs to be resolved.

Insecure-avoidant children minimise or seem not to express attachment needs. In fact, they shut down the attachment system, so that emotions are expressed in a non-overt way. Such children have been described as over-regulated, emotionally. Affect is dampened or hidden, and communication with the caregiver is often mediated through exploration, attention to the external environment, or interaction via a toy. Insecure-avoidant children activate the exploratory system in response to attachment stress. On the surface, they may seem to be interested in play, but their activities are often repetitive and do not have the same high quality as seen in secure children.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Insecure-ambivalent children heighten or 'turn up the volume' on the attachment system. These children are overwhelmed by their emotions and seem unable to contain or manage their attachment distress. When distressed, these children are so preoccupied with their attachment needs that they are unable to successfully explore the environment or engage in play.

These three patterns, secure, insecure-avoidant, and insecure-ambivalent, represent distinct strategies that children use to cope with attachment-related anxieties and, as such, are normal ways of getting proximity to the carer and having their attachment needs met. Each style is matched to the style of caregiving that the child has received in attachment-related circumstances. The way the secure child gets her attachment needs met is by directly expressing them. The avoidant child knows that showing negative emotions does not bring the caregiver close and minimises these feelings. The ambivalent child has learnt that emphasising attachment needs is the best way to keep the caregiver close. As such, these three patterns are seen as organised, adaptive strategies that give the child a relationship solution for their distress.

However, there are some insecure children who do not seem to have an organised attachment strategy. This group is described as *disorganised*. When their attachment system is stressed, they tend to rely on a mixture of avoidant and ambivalent strategies, which may initially appear as disorientation or panic. As infants, they are the most fearful and the least able to manage the stress of separation. By preschool-age, disorganised children tend to show a different strategy, that of *controlling* the caregiver. Controlling behaviour is a sign of a role reversal between the child and the parent, where the child takes the 'executive role'. Controlling children have been seen to use strategies that are either hostile and directive to the parent, or overly caring, to the extent that they seem to be parenting the parent.

Using attachment theory to understand children's behaviour

These four models of attachment relationships give us a framework for understanding the emotional content and strategies that children bring to the early childhood setting and that influence their social interactions. Attachment theory helps to explain how children's relationship history may affect their behaviour under times of stress. As such, it is most relevant to aspects of the child's daily life that tap internal feelings of security, such as separations, reunions and conflicts with peers.

In using attachment theory as a guide for understanding and working with children, the first step for carers is to make an initial assessment of the child's current attachment model. We can do this by closely observing the child at times when the attachment system is activated and identifying the patterns of behaviour that are typical. However, it is important to remember that as the child gets older, insecure strategies of minimising, heightening, or controlling attachment needs and situations become more subtly expressed. It takes thoughtful reflection on the part of adults to identify the underlying approach.

The following examples, drawn from a longitudinal study of children (Harrison & Ungerer, 2000, 1999, 1997), have been chosen to help readers follow this process of observing and interpreting attachment behaviours. Where appropriate, comments have been added to help readers understand their role in supporting children's attachment needs and developing secure relationships.

Parent–child separations

Arrivals and departures at child care or preschool are important transition times that stress the attachment system. As such, they give us valuable information about the child's predominant model of attachment relationships. The key indicators are the degree of openness in the child's expression of emotions, and the effectiveness of adult support in the child's management of separation.

11

Secure model

9:40 Dad arrives and carries Tran (aged 2.5 years) inside. He puts Tran down. Tran hangs onto his Dad's legs, takes his hand to pull him into the room, but then just stands, hanging onto Dad's legs. Dad picks him up again, and Tran snuggles into his shoulder. Dad carries Tran into the playroom. Tran has his head on Dad's shoulder, watching the scene from under his hat. Dad explains to the staff that Tran had been at his grandmother's and didn't want to come. Dad moves closer to the tables, and Tran holds on with two arms around his neck, with his hat down over his eyes, not looking at the staff or children. Dad stands there. He tries to get Tran to get down, saying 'C'mon, let's ....' but Tran hangs on tight.

9:43 Dad carries Tran outside, takes him to a small slide and tries to put him on. Tran keeps holding onto Dad who passes him to the carer. Tran cries and reaches out to his Dad. Dad leaves. Tran cuddles into the carer.

9:47 Tran is sitting with the carer, no longer crying but in close contact, sniffing. The carer gets up and tries to put Tran down and take his jumper off. Tran cries and resists this. The carer sits with Tran again, jogging him on her knee. He stops crying and starts to watch the other children.

9:49 The carer takes Tran by the hand and walks him over to see what the other children are doing, making suggestions about what he could do. Tran goes along with her, holding onto the carer's finger, looking at the children. The carer sits on the bouncing board; Tran leans close to her.

9:55 Tran stands near the carer, sucking his thumb and holding the first finger of the other hand with this hand, so both hands are close to his face.

10:02 Tran silently holds a puppet out to the carer, and to the children.

Tran, a secure child, openly expresses his attachment needs and has them met by his father and carer. He moves smoothly from attachment to exploration, as seen by his initiation of play with the carer. The length of this record reflects the way a young secure child deals with a difficult separation. Tran is clearly distressed. His father affirms his feelings, saying 'he didn't want to come' and this pattern of shared emotions helps Tran to manage his own needs.

Tran's ability to seek and accept comfort from the carer, as shown by his comfortable physical contact with her, gives her an opening to develop a secure relationship with him. The carer shows that she is emotionally attuned to Tran's needs. She lets him settle in slowly. He knows he is safe enough with her to cry when distressed, and is able to use the carer to regulate his emotions and be soothed. His distress gradually diminishes and he is able to initiate play with her and the other children.

Insecure-avoidant model

9:10 Kati (2.5 years) stands next to her mum, with one hand held to her mouth, the other holding her doll. Kati walks away from her mum, points to the playroom equipment and says 'Mum, there's a house' with a smile and an animated expression.

9:11 Kati goes to a table activity near Mum and the carer. Mum talks to the staff, then says 'Gimme a kiss' and crouches down. Kati asks Mum a question about the pictures on the wall. Mum answers. Kati kisses Mum and says goodbye.

9:12 Mum leaves.

Kati's way of saying goodbye to her mum is consistent with the avoidant style where the distress of separation is minimised. Yet it is still there. We see this in her posture, as she holds the doll and her hand to her mouth, which helps to contain the negative emotions she feels. The focus on exploration, rather than attachment, is evident in the way she initiates interactions with her mum by pointing out objects around the room. She shows an overly positive affect that masks the negative feelings that come with separation. The separation has a 'business-like' flavour, brief and somewhat brisk, with little emotional closeness.

Kati does not approach or involve the child care staff for help at separation. Because Kati gives the appearance of managing the separation, the carer may not feel she needs her support; however, avoidant children need their carers to recognise their feelings of separation distress and provide comfort and emotional support.

Insecure-ambivalent model

8:50 After Mum and Amy arrive, Mum sits at the painting table, helping some children. Her daughter, Amy (aged 2.5 years) is busy at the pasting activity, concentrating on her work.

9:00 Amy tells Mum about her work, saying 'I made a snowman'. An older child brings the picture over to show Amy's Mum, Amy gets upset that the girl has it, and takes the pasting, stamping her feet, saying 'No'. Mum explains that the girl was only taking it to show her.

9:05 Mum says to Amy several times 'I'm going to go soon' or 'I'm going to go now.' Amy calls her over to draw some worms. Mum agrees and says she'll go after that. Mum then gets busy with the other children, helping with smocks, etc. She says to Amy, 'I'm going to do one worm and then I'm going, Okay?'

9:08 Mum tells Amy that she's going and will come back after lunch. Amy frowns and follows her, but is distracted by the carer who asks about her picture. Amy holds the two dolls and answers the questions. They move to a table to draw.

Amy's drawn-out, conflicted separation is typical of the insecure-ambivalent pattern. Her attachment needs become heightened during the process of separation, as demonstrated by her anger and her repeated requests for help. Her neediness keeps her mother close and focused on her, but the interchange is not effective in reducing her distress. There is a mismatch between the child's needs and the parent's ability to recognise and meet these. She remains upset after mum leaves, holding onto the two dolls to help her contain her feelings.

Amy's carer is aware of the separation problems the child and her mother are having, but her strategy of focusing Amy's attention on the drawing activity does not recognise or support Amy's emotional needs. Insecure-ambivalent children can be overwhelmed by separation and find it very difficult to regulate their distress. Carers need to accept that separation is stressful and make this known to the child in helping the child to calm down. The experience of becoming calm with a supportive adult will enable ambivalent children to learn self-regulation and manage distress themselves.

Disorganised model

8:50 Tim (2.5 years) comes in with Mum who is carrying the baby. Tim has his finger in his mouth as he wanders in, slowly following Mum. He stands near Mum as the baby is put to bed in the nursery. Mum tells Tim to go out while she does this.

8:55 Tim holds Mum's hand. He hears the baby cry in the other room and pulls at Mum's hand to get her to come into the playroom. The carer talks to Tim, and he goes with Mum to put the fruit away.

8:57 Tim is alone in the kitchen area. Mum is at the sign-in desk. Tim goes to where she is and gets his bag from her. They go upstairs to put the bag away, holding hands. They put the bag in a locker and go outside, holding hands. Tim looks at the rabbit, holding Mum's hand. Tim runs off and gets on a bike, then rides it back to where Mum is. He hugs Mum, arms around her neck. Mum stands up. Tim is on the bike, looking inside the playroom at the children.

9:00 Mum and Tim talk together. Tim hugs Mum, his arms tight around her neck. Mum goes over to the climber. Tim runs after her, and hugs her legs. Mum picks Tim up, holds and carries him. After a short while Tim gets down, and they go inside to the drawing table.

9:05 The carer goes over and tells Tim how to do the activity. Mum does it with him. Mum says 'Give me a kiss, I'm going to go.' Tim says 'No'. Mum helps him with the next drawing, then repeats that she has to go. Mum gets up to leave. Tim whines and puts his arm around her neck. Mum and the carer talk to him. Mum leaves. Tim keeps working at the drawing table.

Tim's response to being left at child care is characteristic of disorganised children's high level of anxiety around attachment issues. He monitors his mother's movements constantly and only leaves her side for brief instances. When faced with her departure, he clings to her tightly and protests, but without the conflict that was seen in the insecure-ambivalent example. There is an immediate shut-down of his anxious behaviour as soon as the mother leaves. This illustrates the way that disorganised children alternate ambivalent and avoidant strategies as they seek to manage their attachment needs.

Tim's carer does a good job of being a reliable supportive presence, for him and for the mother, throughout the process of separation. She helps the two of them manage the separation quite successfully. Typically, at separation, disorganised children are the most anxious, but the least able to accept comfort from carers.

Suggestions for managing separations

Attachment theory offers a means for understanding and working with children who have difficulty managing separation distress. Difficult behaviours may be seen when children draw on patterns of insecure strategies that have 'worked' in the past. In some circumstances, these strategies are the best option, but in others, in particular at child care or preschool, they can be problematic. Adult intervention is needed to provide children with alternate strategies and support them in moving towards a more secure model of attachment. For insecure children, the secure base provided by a sensitive carer will allow them to have a different set of relationship experiences and help to replace existing patterns with a new set of expectations around attachment needs.

Conflict and interaction with peers

The emotional quality of children's interactions with peers, in particular their ability to take the perspective of others, can also provide clues to their model of attachment. Key indicators are the strategies that children use to manage conflict. Do they express feelings openly? Is their emotional response minimised or heightened? Are their emotions overly controlled?

Secure model

Jack (aged 2.5 years) is pushing a boy on a bike. Another boy comes and takes Jack's hand off the back of the bike so he can push. Jack leaves the back of the bike and goes around to the front. Jack talks to the boy on the bike, who pushes Jack away. Jack stands there, watching the boy and following his instructions.

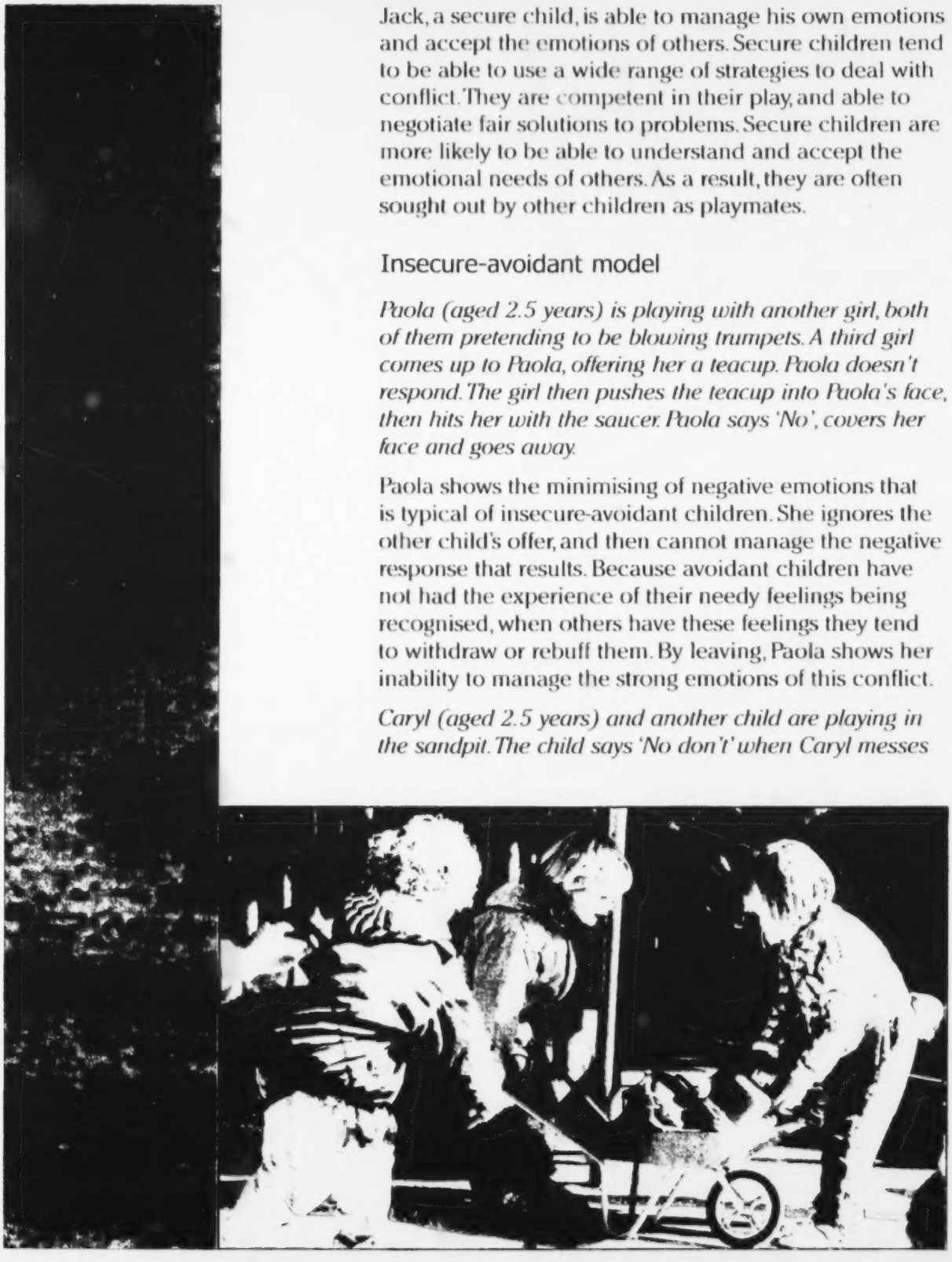
Jack, a secure child, is able to manage his own emotions and accept the emotions of others. Secure children tend to be able to use a wide range of strategies to deal with conflict. They are competent in their play, and able to negotiate fair solutions to problems. Secure children are more likely to be able to understand and accept the emotional needs of others. As a result, they are often sought out by other children as playmates.

Insecure-avoidant model

Paola (aged 2.5 years) is playing with another girl, both of them pretending to be blowing trumpets. A third girl comes up to Paola, offering her a teacup. Paola doesn't respond. The girl then pushes the teacup into Paola's face, then hits her with the saucer. Paola says 'No', covers her face and goes away.

Paola shows the minimising of negative emotions that is typical of insecure-avoidant children. She ignores the other child's offer, and then cannot manage the negative response that results. Because avoidant children have not had the experience of their needy feelings being recognised, when others have these feelings they tend to withdraw or rebuff them. By leaving, Paola shows her inability to manage the strong emotions of this conflict.

Caryl (aged 2.5 years) and another child are playing in the sandpit. The child says 'No don't' when Caryl messes



up the sand. Caryl keeps doing it and the child starts to cry. Caryl looks at closest adult, then at the child, then calls out to her mother 'We're making a pizza hut.' Caryl keeps playing, messing up the sand near the other child, who keeps crying.

Caryl ignores the negative feelings of the other child, but also presents a false impression of the play as positive, in her description of it to her mother. Avoidant children may appear unmoved by the emotions of others, to the point where they are aggressive and hurtful but do not seem to recognise the effect of their behaviour. Both Paola and Caryl present as impersonal in their peer interactions—one avoids conflict, the other causes conflict but ignores the consequences. These avoidant strategies can lead to children being disliked, rejected, and isolated from their peers.

Insecure-ambivalent model

Sara (aged 2.5 years) is playing with a doll and blanket. Another child takes the blanket. Sara cries and looks for help. She screams 'No' as the child takes more of the toys. Sara cries and becomes very upset, looks for an adult, and cries even more loudly when the child comes again. Sara makes no attempt to get the toys back.

Sara shows the insecure-ambivalent pattern of helplessness. Although needy, Sara is passive in the face of the other child's aggression. She shows no active response, and looks to her carers to come and solve the problem. Ambivalent children can become so overwhelmed by their emotional needs that they have no way to deal with even minor conflicts with peers. In contrast to the over-regulated emotions of the insecure-avoidant child, the insecure-ambivalent child's emotions are under-regulated, leading either to helplessness and passivity, or to outbursts of aggressive, angry, distressed feelings. Both patterns are associated with poor peer interaction; helpless children tend to be picked on by others; out-of-control children tend to be avoided by others.

Disorganised model

Peter (aged 2.5 years) follows a younger child balancing along the blocks. The child slips and falls. The child hits Peter, making an angry vocalisation. Peter just looks, smiles, says nothing and continues to follow the child

Music time. Alice (aged 2.5 years) is using the bells. A child comes over to play with them. Alice moves the bells back, keeping them to herself. Alice manages to follow the song, do the actions, watch the child and move the bells away from the other child without missing a beat.

Con (aged 2.5 years) is putting his shoes on. There is another child close by playing with a truck. He takes one of the shoes and puts it in the truck. Con says 'Hey' and grabs the shoe. The child hits Con, gently. Con ignores this, gets back up on the couch to continue putting his shoes on. He spends the next 15 minutes concentrating on getting his shoes on.

Peter, Alice, and Con all show the disconnection from their peers that can be seen in the play behaviour of disorganised children. All three show an unawareness of the other child's feelings. They seem to be in their own world, emotionally disconnected from their peers. Alice and Con also show an internalised controlling strategy that gives them a means of managing the stress of peer conflict. Disorganised children have been described as highly inconsistent in their interaction with peers (Lyons-Ruth & Jacobvitz, 1999), being either aggressive and controlling, or distant, with a low threshold for distress. Neither pattern is competent for developing peer play.

Suggestions for managing peer conflict

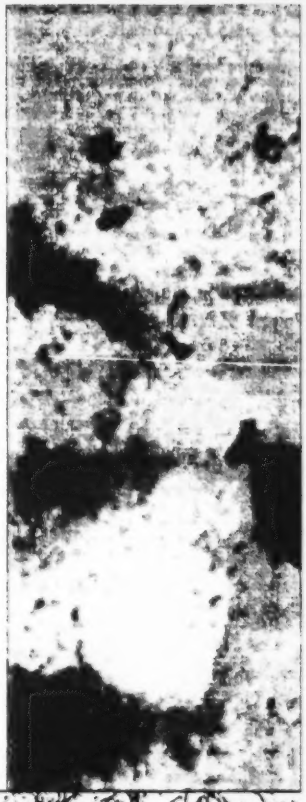
Children's models of attachment are formed through relationships with adults, but these internal working models influence the ways children interact with peers, especially under situations of conflict or stress. Insecure children may appear impersonal or helpless or controlling in peer play. Without adult intervention, these strategies and the negative responses they elicit from peers can result in a cycle or peer rejection.

Building secure attachment relationships with children

Secure, trusting relationships with carers provide children with the foundation for their successful exploration of the social and learning environment. Attachment theory gives us a basis for understanding the pre-existing models of attachment that children bring with them to child care or preschool, and a framework for developing secure relationships. But before being able to move a child towards a secure model of attachment, carers need to consider the nature of the child's current pattern of attachment relationships. Carers need to identify the child's model of attachment, by careful observation of the behaviours the child uses to manage emotionally stressful situations. Carers also need to reflect on their own responses to these behaviours. The challenge is to avoid reinforcing any existing insecurities, and to provide children with experiences of secure interactions.

In a secure relationship, children feel emotionally safe with their carers. They are able to express both positive and negative emotions and share these openly with their carers, allowing a real sense of intimacy to develop. The secure base provided by a sensitive carer enables them to focus on exploration of the social and learning environment, in an autonomous and independent way.

Insecure children tend to be more dependent on their adult carers, but counter-intuitively dependency does not lead to close or effective relationships. Avoidant children show their dependency needs indirectly, by interacting through toys, asking for help or offering to help the adult. They maintain an almost vigilant awareness of the carer, monitoring his/her whereabouts or hovering nearby. But if carers discourage what they see as 'attention-seeking,' they may be reinforcing an existing insecure pattern of ignoring and failing to meet the child's needs. In order to build a secure relationship, carers need to break the cycle of rejection by recognising and affirming the child's feelings and helping him understand and express his emotions openly.



Ambivalent children show their dependency needs more overtly. They are either impulsive, excitable, and demanding and require a lot of carer attention and support, or they are needy, anxious, and easily distressed and expect the adult to help with any problems that arise. If carers are inconsistent in their responses to the child's behaviour (sometimes with warmth and other times with exasperation), they may be reinforcing an insecure pattern of unpredictable responses to attachment needs. To build a secure relationship with an ambivalent child, carers need to replace the cycle of unpredictability with consistent, caring interaction. These children need to be helped to manage their own feelings, and be given support and strategies that will enable them to be less overwhelmed by their own emotions.

Disorganised or controlling children present the most challenging attachment behaviours because their mixed strategies (avoidant and ambivalent) can make it difficult for staff to feel they fully understand the child. The child may bring a controlling aspect to the interaction, which shuts out the carer, or alternately, the child can be very quiet and may even go unnoticed. Despite appearances, however, the underlying attachment system operates at a level of high anxiety, with fearfulness or feelings of abandonment. Howes (1999) has commented that in order to construct a secure relationship with such children, carers may need to be much more sensitive than is the case in typical child–adult attachment. It is important for staff to recognise that transforming an internal model of fear to one of security is a slow process. In working to develop positive relationships, sensitivity to individual needs and just 'being there' as a secure base for the child are the first steps.

Conclusion

All children have the right to feel emotionally safe and secure in their early childhood settings. The importance of trusting relationships with carers is emphasised in the Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (NCAC, 1993), the NSW Curriculum Framework (2002), and other government policy documents. The challenge for staff is

to understand the emotional content of each child's behaviour and to assess their own emotional responses to that behaviour. Insecure children may have pre-existing patterns of interaction that are maladaptive, which can result in rejection by peers and over-dependency on carers. Carers' responses may inadvertently reinforce the child's maladaptive behaviours. By reflecting on the interactions they have with children, sensitive carers can adjust their responses and help the child experience a different way of relating to others. Gradually, these experiences will enable the child to replace existing insecure attachment patterns with secure ways of dealing with attachment needs.

Note

Studies in Australia (Harrison & Ungerer, 1997; Gibson, Ungerer, McMahon, Leslie, & Saunders, 2000) have shown that 60 to 65 per cent of infants are securely attached and 35 to 40 per cent are insecurely attached. This distribution is similar to other recent studies in the United States and Western Europe (NICHD, 1997; van IJzendoorn & Kroonenberg, 1988). However, research has also shown that the proportion of secure children tends to decrease under circumstances of social disadvantage or severe family stress (Belsky & Cassidy, 1994)

References

Belsky, J., & Cassidy, J. (1994). Attachment: Theory and evidence. In M. Rutter & D. Hay (Eds.), *Development through life: A handbook for clinicians* (pp. 373–402). Oxford: Blackwell.

Bowlby, J. (1969/1982). *Attachment and loss: Vol. 1. Attachment.* NY: Basic Books.

Dolby, R., Warren, E., & Mares, S. (July, 2001). *A new collaboration between psychiatry and child care: The establishment of a mentor group.* Paper presented at the Australian Early Childhood Association Biennial Conference, Sydney, NSW.

Gibson, F., Ungerer, J., McMahon, C., Leslie, G., & Saunders, D. (2000). The mother-child relationship following in vitro fertilization (IVF): Infant attachment, responsivity, and maternal sensitivity. *Journal of Child Psychiatry and Psychology, 41,* 1015–1024.

Harrison, L. J., & Ungerer, J. A. (2000). *Children and child care. A longitudinal study of the relationships between developmental outcomes and use of nonparental care from birth to six.* Paper prepared for the Department of Family and Community Services, Panel Data and Policy Conference, Canberra, May. (Available online: http://www.csu.edu.au/faculty/educat/teached/Facsconf.doc)

Harrison, L., & Ungerer, J. (August, 1999). *The Sydney Family Development Project: Longitudinal Predictors of Children's Socioemotional Development.* Paper prepared for the Australian Early Childhood Association Biennial Conference, Darwin, NT. (Available online: http://www.aeca.org.au/darconfharr.html)

Harrison, L., & Ungerer, J. (1997). Child care predictors of infant-mother attachment security at age 12 months. *Early Child Development and Care, 137,* 31–46.

Howes, C. (1999). Attachment relationships to multiple caregivers. In J. Cassidy & P. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (pp. 671–687). NY: The Guildford Press.

Lyons-Ruth, K., & Jacobvitz, D. (1999). Attachment disorganisation: Unresolved loss, relational violence, and lapses in behavioural and attentional strategies. In J. Cassidy & P. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (pp. 520–554). NY: The Guildford Press.

National Child care Accreditation Council (NCAC). (1993). *Putting children first: Quality Improvement and Accreditation System handbook.* Sydney, Australia: Author.

NICHD Early Child Care Research Network. (1997). The effects of infant child care on infant–mother attachment security: Results of the NICHD study of early child care. *Child Development,* 68, 860–879.

NSW Dept of Community Services. (2002) *NSW Curriculum Framework for Children's Services: The practice of relationships.* Sydney, NSW: Office of Child care.

van IJzendoorn, M., & Kroonenberg, P. (1988). Cross-cultural patterns of attachment: A meta-analysis of the strange situation. *Child Development,* 59, 147–156.

van IJzendoorn, M., Sagi, A., & Lambermon, M. (1992). The multiple caregiver paradox: Data from Holland and Israel. In R. Pianta (Ed.), *New directions for child development:* No. 57. Beyond the parent: The role of other adults in children's lives (pp. 5–27). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Further reading on attachment

Most recent child development textbooks will have a section on attachment theory.

Goldberg, S. (2000). *Attachment and development.* London: Arnold.

Nixon, D., & Gould, K. (1996). *Emerging: Child development in the first three years.* Wentworth Falls: Social Science Press.

Some early childhood texts include approaches to curriculum planning and adult–child interaction that draw on attachment theory.

Gonzales-Mena, J., & Eyer, D. W. (1997). *Infants, toddlers, and caregivers* (4th edn). CA: Mayfield Publishing.

Honig, A. (2002). *Secure relationships Nurturing infant/toddler attachment in early care settings.* Washington DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Hutchins, T. (1995). *Babies need more than minding: Planning programs for babies and toddlers in group settings.* Australian Early Childhood Association: Canberra.

Post, J., & Hohmann, M. (2000). *Tender care and early learning: Supporting infants and toddlers in child care settings.* Ypsilanti, MI: High/Scope Press.

The following texts present a more detailed discussion of the clinical implications of working with children and families with attachment-related problems.

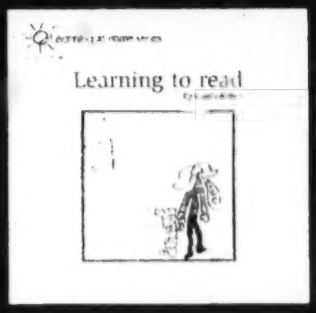
Greenberg, M. (1999). Attachment and psychopathology in childhood. In J. Cassidy & P. Shaver (Eds.), *Handbook of attachment: Theory, research, and clinical applications* (pp. 469–496). NY: The Guildford Press.

Howe, D. (1995). *Attachment theory for social work practice.* London: Macmillan Press.

Pianta, R. C., & Walsh, D. L. (1996). *High-risk children in schools: Constructing sustaining relationships.* New York: Routledge.

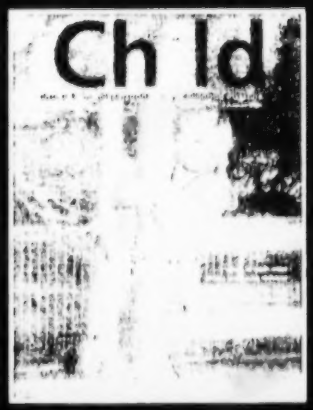
BEST COPY AVAILABLE

SUBSCRIBE NOW



Learning at Home Series – This brand new series has been developed to provide additional support for carers, parents, grandparents and all who care for children in the home. Future editions will feature music, art, maths and science.

Research in Practice Series – Don't miss out on this highly popular series. The topics are different each edition and recent titles have been re-printed due to demand! Past issues have focused on autism spectrum disorder, boys and literacy, and ethics.



Every Child – The magazine for all early childhood professionals. Be entertained, informed and educated.

Make life easier – Subscribe!

Don't forget

subscriptions for early childhood professionals are tax deductible

To Subscribe call toll free 1800 356 900
Email: national@aeca.org.au

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Attachment: Building secure relationships in early childhood

Forming attachment relationships is an integral part of life for everyone and is critically important for young children's emotional development and wellbeing.

In this book, Linda Harrison describes different kinds of attachment relationships and how these relationships can affect children's behaviour.

Everyday stressful situations, such as separations from parents and peer conflicts, are examined in the light of different attachment types to provide valuable advice on understanding young children and helping them to become emotionally healthy, through bulding secure attachment relationships.

Subscribe to the Research in Practice Series

This quarterly series aims to provide practical, easy to read, up-to-date information and support to a growing national readership of early childhood workers. The books bring together the best information available on wide ranging topics and are an ideal resource for children's services workers and others interested in the care and education of young children.

To subscribe to the Research in Practice Series
Tel: (toll free) 1800 356 900 Email: national@aeca.org.au

Child

ECA Research in Practice Series
Early Childhood Australia Inc.
PO Box 105 Watson ACT 2602
Tel: (02) 6241 6900 Fax: (02) 6241 5547
Email: publishing@earlychildhood.org.au

25
BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
National Library of Education (NLE)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

NOTICE

Reproduction Basis

X	This document is covered by a signed "Reproduction Release (Blanket)" form (on file within the ERIC system), encompassing all or classes of documents from its source organization and, therefore, does not require a "Specific Document" Release form.
	This document is Federally-funded, or carries its own permission to reproduce, or is otherwise in the public domain and, therefore, may be reproduced by ERIC without a signed Reproduction Release form (either "Specific Document" or "Blanket").

EFF-089 (1/2003)

PDC31338